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Reminiscences of James Whitcomb Riley

With all best greetings and Esteem
James Whitcomb Riley

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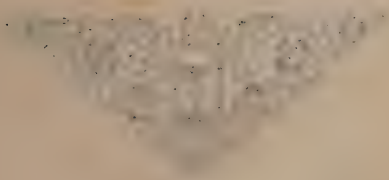
By Clara E. Laughlin



Reminiscences
of
James Whitcomb Riley

By

Clara E. Laughlin

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TO

Elizabeth Whitcomb Eitel

I

MY acquaintance with Mr. Riley began by correspondence. I began it. A ridiculously young editor, with soaring ambitions and the least money imaginable, I was gravely trying to conduct the literary departments of a Chicago weekly. I had a yearly allowance for my editorial purchases, and so long as I kept within that sum I was permitted to have whatever my eighteen-year-old tastes dictated and my purse would buy.

I decided to have a Riley poem. To this end I skimped and saved until I had amassed the staggering sum of twenty-five dollars, which, without any preliminary negotiations, I sent to Mr. Riley with a

polite note requesting twenty-five dollars worth of his very best poetry. I had no idea of the temerity of my request. That twenty-five-dollar check looked big enough to me to buy "In Memoriam" or "Paradise Lost."

I got the poem. How many hundreds of dollars many another editor would gladly have paid for that poem I am now ashamed to think. But I wasn't ashamed then. I didn't know enough.

I was appreciative, though; and while Mr. Riley was no stranger to appreciation, he doubtless liked it as well as we all do. So, what with the passing back and forth of proof (Mr. Riley was a most punctilious reader of proof) and grateful acknowledgments, and so on, our correspondence began.

In June following that Christmas when I proudly presented my readers

with a Riley poem filling an entire page, there came to me from the poet an urgent invitation to go down to Winona Lake, Indiana, to attend the annual sessions of the Western Writers' Association.

Who started this society I do not know, nor have I any idea if it is still in existence. But if it continues, it must be so different from the Association I knew, that I may, perhaps, be pardoned for writing of it in the past tense. It had its genesis in a day before the Indiana School of fiction was famed; in a day when editors and publishers had not yet begun to court the Middle West; when many persons who ought doubtless to have known better, still felt they must have their heroes tailored on Broadway, their heroines costumed on Fifth Avenue, and who tuned their very lyres to sing about New England's coast.

The readiness and heartiness with which James Whitcomb Riley would respond to an invitation from persons wishing to associate with Western writers can be imagined. No one needs to be told how earnest he was in his belief that literature should be indigenous; that it should chronicle and illumine the things its writers knew best. He was, to quote his own words, "the first of ten or fifteen vice-presidents" of the Association. He not only attended its sessions, but he brought to them a great many persons of distinguished literary achievement, who met the members and addressed them from the platform and who served still another purpose: they gave Mr. Riley fellowship and some brief respites from the palpitating poets and poetesses, who lurked in every clump of shrubbery to waylay him and read to him, as

he ruefully said, "peach-baskets full o' poetry." Every muse of the corn-belt carried the year's product to Winona, and each one hoped to read the whole output to Mr. Riley.

I am afraid that of the persons who were seriously working in a way to bring honor to Western writers, very few went to those sessions at Winona Lake unless Mr. Riley energetically rounded them up and drove them there. And most of the voluntary attendants were rather pathetic. But Mr. Riley was marvellously patient and kind. And I think I understand now, as I did not then, how he felt about those plaintive pipings; how he valued them, not for what they were about to confer on a waiting world, but for what he knew it meant to those various persons *to sing* or to create unrestricted worlds of fancy and desire.

I went to Winona Lake, which is some three and a half hours' ride from Chicago; my train reached there about 6:30, when nearly everybody was at supper. Mr. Riley was at the little railway station, and he seemed to be looking for someone; but that it could be for me did not occur to me. I was hot and grimy, and Mr. Frank Marshall, a friend whom I had met on the train, had warned me to hurry if I wanted any supper. So I did not discover myself to the poet, but made all haste to the hotel.

After a quick wash and freshening up, I went down to supper, to join me at which Mr. Marshall had very kindly waited. When we passed the desk in the office, Mr. Riley was scanning the register.

Mr. Marshall and I had the dining-room to ourselves, and our

seats were more than half-way down the long room, facing the door. Shortly after we had begun to eat our supper, I saw Mr. Riley come to the door and look in. Presently a bell-boy came and whispered something in Mr. Marshall's ear. The answer was, "Yes, it is"; and a minute later Mr. Riley was walking down the long center aisle of the dining-room, his face lighted with the peculiarly winning expression I came to know so well as the precursor of his quaint drolleries—the expression Sargent has immortalized in his portrait of Riley.

Not a word did the poet say to me by way of introduction: just looked at me with eyes that were dancing with whimsical humor; then, in that drawl of his which can never be described, much less reproduced on paper, he demanded: "Where are your corkscrew curls?"

There had been nothing in those solemn letters of mine to prepare him for the chit of a thing who answered to my name; and the disparity between his preconception of me and the individual I turned out to be amused him more than a little. His mental picture of me had been that of a very spinsterly middle-aged Presbyterian person, whose lack of acquaintance with the world was pathetically evident—just the one to revel in those peach-baskets full of poetry! He admitted that his disappointment was acute. But he made the best of it and did not allow me to feel too chagrined.

There were programs every day, several of them—morning, afternoon, and evening—all designed to be very improving to persons who did not care who made the nation's laws but sought for themselves the

higher responsibility of making the nation's songs. Sometimes we attended these; but I am afraid that oftener we played hookey.

Mr. Riley's respect for the earnestness displayed in those programs was genuine and, in a way, profound. But also he could not help knowing how funny they were. I recall one young school teacher from a small Indiana town who had either been assigned or had chosen for her theme, "French Novels"; which, ever was true, it was more incredible than the other could have been. It was a season of organdies, and this nice girl, who was Irish, and as modest as perhaps only a sweet Irish maid can be, was a-flutter with pale-blue organdie, ruffled and ribboned in the very best style of the local modiste. She was scared, too—not only because it was an awesome thing to be reading a

paper before the Western Writers' Association, but because the subject was so *risqué*. She began by saying, earnestly, that she hoped no one present would think she had ever read any French novels. And then she told us all about them that a nice girl could impart to her literary *confrères*.

Another speaker who gave us great delight was a very tall, very slender, very superior youth, whom we called "the Kipling stripling." He had just discovered "Barrack Room Ballads," and he told about them with an air Columbus might have worn but probably did not when telling Queen Isabella what he had found overseas. Mr. Riley made some delicious pencil sketches of this missioner, which I ought to have in some dust-laden box or other.

I don't mean to affirm that all

the papers were as funny as these, nor to deny that we should not have liked them better if they had been. Most of them were as deadly dull as "papers" usually are. So, as unostentatiously as possible, we sat down by the lake's reedy marge and talked of shoes and ships and sealing-wax, or cabbages and kings, or went on truant trips to Warsaw, two miles or so away, a gay metropolis where one could purchase execrable soda water and much worse candy, and lead a lurid life far from the culture-craving crowd.

Once, at Warsaw, milder amusements having palled, we sought a secluded spot—I think it was on the court-house lawn—and indulged in a game of mumbledy-peg, whereat the poet was amazing proficient. He was executing some breath-taking stunt in this and doing it with a gusto that "Buddy" Riley could

never have outmatched in his best Greenfield days, when he was recognized by a Warsaw admirer. Well! As for me, I couldn't see that the admirer was to be pitied that glimpse, probably his only one, of the author of "Little Orphant Annie" and "The Raggedy Man." But Mr. Riley seemed to think it left something to be desired in the manner of meeting a poet. "May never meet another, you know," he complained comically, "and it's likely to color all his ideas of poets. Too bad!" I think we bought a watermelon to revive our drooping self-respect. But I remember that it used to be no small problem to sit by the side of a road and eat a watermelon with dignity. And just as surely as we dispensed with the dignity, out of an adjacent corn-stalk or hollow stump would rise as by magic some one saying:

"Oh! there's James Whitcomb Riley!"

He was one of the very few literary persons this country has produced who was almost universally recognized when he walked abroad. I am not sure that even Mark Twain was so generally known—at least not before he began wearing white suits. Most writers come and go unnoticed by their fellowmen, unless they, if they are male, happen to resemble a popular prize-fighter or, if they are female, a favorite actress. But Riley was sure to be known and acclaimed, anywhere he went. And while he appreciated the interest people had in him, he was not inconsiderably irked by it, ofttimes. As, for instance, when I went with him once into a "gents' furnishing store," in a small Indiana town, the proprietor delightedly recognized his customer.

"The las' time I see Mr. Riley," he confided to me, "was when he was a right young fella. He painted me a sign. I got it yet—wouldn't take any money fer it. Like to see it?"

I had heard a great deal about that phase of Mr. Riley's youth when he ran away from home and the study of law, and supported himself in his errantry by painting store-signs. So I thanked the "gents' furnisher" and said I should be glad indeed to see his treasure.

He produced it: an odd little specimen of fancy lettering, in bright blue.

"I 'member," the proud possessor said, "like it was yesterday, the day that sign was painted. Mr. Riley wore kid gloves while he was paintin' it."

At this point Mr. Riley vanished. When I rejoined him, half a block

away, he was fuming and fulminating in his own peculiar, picturesque style.

"The large, gentlemanly pearl-gray ass!" he cried. "He *dreamed* that fantasy on some dark, moonless night, and he has told it so many times that he has made himself believe it. Why, a man *couldn't* paint with kid gloves on!"

I remember asking for illumination about the pearl-gray variety of ass.

"Don't know much about asses, do you?" he replied.

I admitted that I didn't.

"Well," he said, "a pearl-gray ass is one that has been an ass a long, long time."

He had a multitude of such expressions. I recollect his saying a man had "hard-boiled eyes," and describing a certain woman's mouth as "like a stab in the dark."

II

THE June days at Winona Lake were pleasant; but the evenings were memorable indeed.

There was a small "ordinary" off the main dining-room, and there we were wont to gather—four, six, infrequently more of us—and banquet splendidly on crackers and cheese, pickles, sweet chocolate, and cold tea. I have sat at many a table, since, with the keenest and most charming personages of my day; but I have never heard talk so fascinating.

Mr. Riley was always the dominating spirit, his mood the key in which our pleasure was pitched. His sensibility to the moods of others was, at times like those, extraordinary; he seemed to know

infallibly when everybody was in time and tune, and when some one was ever so little off key. In the latter event he would keep the conversation within the safe bounds of jocularity. He had to feel perfectly assured before he would venture upon any seriousness.

There was one evening when we were but four at table: Mr. Riley, Mr. Frank L. Stanton, the Atlanta poet, Mrs. Whipple—a little lady into whose chaperonage Mr. Riley had consigned me immediately upon his discovery of my disconcerting youth—and I. Mr. Stanton's mind is an inexhaustible store-house of great poetry, which he recites beautifully. Out under the trees that silvery June night, he had repeated, on Mr. Riley's continued urging, poem after poem. His memory is particularly rich in Shakespeare; and, bit by bit as the talk

ran on, he illumined it with snatches of this immortal scene and of that.

Just how the talk proceeded from Shakespeare to Mrs. Browning, I do not recall, but it was an easy progress. Mr. Riley considered Mrs. Browning's mind the most exquisite that had expressed itself in poetry since Shakespeare. At any rate, we were talking of her when we went indoors; and I, who had my thumbed and much-marked copy of her poems with me, went to my room and fetched it.

We had our bite to eat, still talking of her, and there came up the old, old subject of how much an artist must have lived and suffered in order to express himself with passion and authority. Mr. Riley said it was a matter not of extensity but of intensity: that in going to the depths of one great human emotion one reaches a point

of sympathetic understanding where all profound emotions become comprehensible.

In illustration of this he began to read from my copy of Mrs. Browning. First he read "Bianca Among the Nightingales," and oh, how he read it! His was truly a golden voice, comparable to none other that I have ever heard in man; it had extraordinary flexibility and intense, quiet passion.

As he read the ravings of poor, jealousy-mad Bianca, there was such wildness of pain in his tones as made us who listened ache with almost unendurable anguish. Then he read "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point," and our tears flowed unrestrained.

"You see?" he said. "Having plumbed the deeps, in one great emotional experience, that little bit of a bed-ridden English woman was

equally capable of comprehending the hot jealousy of a passionate Italian girl raving for her faithless lover, and the wild agony of a black mother torn from her child. Yet she had never even seen a black woman. Below a certain depth all suffering is sympathetic."

On another night, Hector Fuller was a member of our little group. He was at that time literary and dramatic critic of the Indianapolis *News*, and Mr. Riley found much pleasure in his companionship. An Englishman by birth and a cosmopolite by experience, Mr. Fuller has a rich emotional nature, a broad and deep acquaintance with life and with letters. It was one of the absurdities of editorial parsimony that, as if reviewing all the new books and all the plays were not enough work for any one man, or any two, for that matter,

Mr. Fuller must needs conduct a column of questions and answers, wherein superannuated subscribers might ask a multitude of futile questions about "*A* says So-and-So is right. *B* insists that it is Thus-and-So. Please settle dispute." One of Mr. Riley's pastimes was to think up the most preposterous queries, and write them to the *News* in a feigned hand; or, when in company with Mr. Fuller, to sit pondering things to propound to him. As, for example, with face serious, innocent, questioning: "Fuller, which has the sanction of the best literary usage—them molass*es*, or those molass*es*?" And so on.

Mr. Riley loved to "play pretend" as much as any child of whom he ever wrote. Something so struck his fancy, on one evening when Mr. Fuller was with us, as to make him recognize in Fuller an erst-

while butler, Tompkins, who had stolen his master's good clothes and gone masquerading as a gentleman. Without a second's hesitation, Mr. Fuller pleaded guilty to being indeed Tompkins, begged for mercy, and, having been pardoned the theft, rose from his seat and resumed "butlering."

He is a mime of rare ability; I do not know whether he had, at any time in his varied career, experience on the stage; but he has not only the appearance of an able histrion, but the gifts of one. His mien, his manner, as Tompkins, made the characterization as artistic, in its way, as Mr. Gillette's butler in "The Admirable Crichton."

Tompkins' "gentleman" (Mr. Riley) was, it seemed, the Honorable E. Harold Ashby of Hightowers, Newby, Scrapshire, England; and I was Lady Glendower.

Our food, elegantly "butlered," was of the same Warsaw grocery store, paper-bag variety; but the service was distinguished, and the occasion had an air of exclusive English aristocracy, except that, in spite of our heroic efforts at aristocratic suppression, we were far merrier than any supper party of English aristocrats I have ever known or "heard tell of." Tompkins had lapses of dignity, forgetful moments when he joined in the conversation. But his quick resumption of the Tompkins air, on the Honorable Ashby's incensed reminder, was such clever playing that I am afraid some of us may have encouraged him to forget his place.

I find a letter dated several years later, which begins:

"DEAR LADY GLENDOWER:

I go at once with your message to Tompkins, who, I learn, has taken service

with some titled personage on the staff of one of our daily papers here, and I hasten to assure your Excellency that, even though a serving man, Tompkins is a most loyal adherent of your Ladyship's cause wherever cast, and I have the honor to forecast your faithful servant's continued fealty to any claim upon his services that it might please your Ladyship, through me, to designate to the worthy rascal."

Mr. John Curtis, secretary of the Bobbs-Merrill Company, Mr. Riley's publishers, was very often a member of these supper-table groups, and always entered with delightful spirit into the occasion, whether grave or gay. Mr. Riley had a warm affection for Mr. Curtis, whom he nevertheless teased with rare unction. Another friend of the poet, who came to Winona Lake at his behest, was "Bob" Burdette. I do not remember having seen Mr. Riley in the company of any other man who more perfectly

evoked the personality of Riley or more richly responded to it. When they were together, what one didn't think of, t'other did.

There was an evening, during that first visit of mine to Winona, when our supper party included Mr. Riley, Mr. Burdette, Mr. Curtis, Mr. William E. English of Indianapolis, Mrs. Whipple, and me. Mr. Riley's brother-in-law and sister, Mr. and Mrs. Henry Eitel, may have been there, and the poet's other sister, Mary Riley Payne. I am not sure. But I remember the menu, perfectly. It was: cracknels, leathery American cheese, German sweet chocolate, a kind of sweet pickled cauliflower—out of a barrel in the Warsaw grocery—and a very thin lemonade, which Mr. Riley made and for which we had only three lemons. But Mr. English, who has sat at many tables where the nation's cleverest

talk is supposed to flow, said he had never heard, anywhere, the equal of the table talk that night.

That fall Mr. Riley wrote me:

"Mr. Burdette was here two days ago—from here went to Chicago, where he was to meet Mr. Curtis. By this they've called upon you, doubtless, as Mr. B. told me he meant to write some Christmas verse for you. Wish it had been possible for me to have gone with the lovely man—then I *know* you'd 'a' saw him. Speakin' o' language, do you recall the inspired blind wood-sawyer's lines?—

'He was a sawyer—blind from birth,
Tho' otherwise without a flaw,—
While no one ever saw him see,
Many have seen him saw.'"

III

IN the winter following my first visit to Winona, I went down to Southern Indiana to spend a week-end with Mrs. Whipple, who lives in Rockville, near Terre Haute. On Monday morning we took an early train—oh, a *very* early train; at six o'clock, or thereabouts—for Indianapolis, where I had never been. Mr. Curtis met us at the depot (Mr. Riley loathed trains, depots, and—as he would have said—"all appurtenances thereof") and escorted us to the Denison Hotel, where he left us, saying that he and Mr. Riley would call at one o'clock to take us to luncheon.

Mr. Riley was very proud of Indianapolis. He loved the spirit that characterized it in those days.

He revelled in its homeliness (I use the word as the English do, and not as we prostitute it) and its standards of aristocracy and democracy. He told me, rhapsodically, how ex-Presidents and Vice-Presidents of these United States, might be seen, daily, on the beautiful, broad, superbly shaded residence streets of Indianapolis, jogging downtown in the back-seat of the modest family surrey, driven by the colored man-of-all-work, and bound for the big market to select chickens and fresh vegetables, before going to their law offices. He told me how, at evening gatherings in those fine, old-fashioned homes where the best of everything was cultivated and appreciated, one might meet a young lady who had that day sold one something over a counter downtown. He believed that Indianapolis was a city where

gentleness and fineness of spirit, of mind, rated one—not money in bank, or opulent possessions. I am afraid he felt some changes before he died. But in those days, at any rate, it was as fine-flavored a community as one could wish to be in.

Mr. Riley expatiated on this, as we set forth from the Denison that cold winter noonday, to go to lunch. I was interested, of course; but I had breakfasted about five, and I had another interest which was—I may as well confess—paramount just then.

After we had walked about the snowy streets for some time, we halted and Mr. Riley and Mr. Curtis debated where they would take us to lunch. We listened politely, but hoped it was nearby. Their argument grew spirited, then acrimonious. At length they compromised on some place, and we

went thither. On the very threshold their disagreement broke out afresh. We assured them that we were sure this place would do. But, no! Mr. Curtis discovered in himself an unconquerable aversion to it. We resumed our quest. But the next place proved to be one where Mr. Riley had been cavalierly treated, and he would not have me get my first impression of Indianapolis there. I wanted to tell him that no place which contained real food would impress me as less lovely than the very courts of Heaven. But I didn't. About two o'clock we halted before a tall office-building. The gentlemen, who by that time were scarcely on speaking terms with one another, assured us that the Indianapolis Commercial Club had its quarters on the top floor of this building, and that the club owned a portrait of Riley which I might like to see.

I have never been less eager to see any portrait; but we went up to the Commercial Club. We discussed the portrait. I mean, somebody discussed it; I am sure I didn't.

Finally, Mr. Riley said: "Perhaps you're hungry?"

I pleaded guilty. Thereupon Mr. Curtis disappeared, to see if we could get lunch at the club. He came back from his tour of inquiry and reported that while the regular luncheon was over, we could get a cold "snack." By that time I was reconciled to anything that could even optimistically be called food. So we repaired to one of the private dining-rooms—where we found a perfect bower of American Beauty roses, and a luncheon which had been ordered days before and included every delicacy in and out of season.

We sat there until six p.m. I cannot definitely recall any of Mr.

Riley's table talk that day. But I remember that two colored waiters were in attendance, and so great was their delight in Mr. Riley's stories that neither of them was willing to leave the room to fetch a new course from the kitchen, an argument which promised to become at any moment a "scrap," ensuing each time the necessity arose.

Afterwards I went often to Indianapolis, and had many memorable times. Usually I stayed with Mr. Riley's elder sister, Mrs. Eitel, a rarely lovely woman who idolized her brother Jim and never tired telling me stories of his boyhood. We made several excursions to Greenfield, the little town twenty miles or so from Indianapolis where the poet and his brothers and sisters were born and grew to adult years.

To visit Greenfield with the

Rileys was an event indeed. We went to their old home, which sits back from the National Road along which the picturesque prairie schooners used to pass with Empire's westering star, while Buddy Riley hung on the gate watching them out of wondering big blue eyes. We saw "Th' Ole Swimmin' Hole"; walked "Up and Down Old Brandywine"; called upon the apple-cheeked, sweet-souled old gentleman, Captain Lee O. Harris, who had been Jim Riley's schoolteacher; and took due note of the schoolhouse where Riley, like the bard of Stratford, got not only his first principles of learning, but also his first taste of the drama's delights. It was there, he told me, that he saw his first play, "The Corsican Brothers." The rapture of that occasion left an ineffaceable memory. Years later he saw Henry

Irving in the same play. He sat in Irving's own box at the Lyceum Theatre in London, but he found the play "strangely altered," and for the worse, despite Irving's talents as player and producer.

That Greenfield did not suffice to hold Jim Riley was not to be wondered at; but he always loved it tenderly, and I am sure he was much gratified by the way it loved him.

Among his townsfolk, two who particularly engaged his interest were Mr. Will Vawter, an artist, and his sister, Miss Clara Vawter, a delicate, sweet girl with a mind rich in pretty whimsies and quaint child-lore.

Mr. Riley encouraged Miss Vawter to write. And in a letter to me he says:

". . . Just now I've another glory for you,—a bran'-new, shore-fer-certain Child-

author—or, rather, a truly gifted writer *of* children and *for* them. In proof of which I proudly enclose a sketch by Miss Clara Vawter—a young sister of the artist of my last book. And now I want you not only to be rejoiced over this deliciously original and wholesome little story, but to send its most deserving author an 'appreciation' —only, don't use that word—they've overworked it, East, so the sweat fairly stands out on its furr'ed!—What a joy and what a help it will be to her! Possibly you may have met her at my sister's. If so, you'll not have forgotten her. Indeed you should know each other steadfastly. Do send her a cheery hail."

And when I gladly complied, he wrote:

"Oh, I knew our Genius would appreciate a hail from you. *Her* letter is purt' nigh so good I don't know which of you ort to feel most proudest of th' other'n! There's where such real letters as you can't help writing aren't wasted—and I *do* want you two signed friends for all your blessed literary lives. I have only mainly known

her as a child, and *now*—while it's a bewildering thing to realize—she is a brilliant young woman every way, save, I fear, in promise of robust health. That, however, might be a condition happily bettered by cheery, wholesome friends and their heartening influence and advice. Not that I gather an impression of a melancholy temperament or tendency—but the contrary,—so that sound health, to her, would be more the result of wholesome *mental* food than that of the bread-and-butter variety. Lord! how I'd like, just now, to be a glitteringly keen and subtle-minded, diplomatic C. E. L.! Then what a lovely, lovable task were mine of developing this like gifted sister—and how proud I'd be of the prompt result of that gracious interest, seeing her surely coming into her own. . . . But here! I'm not only preaching but writing you a letter. Forgive both, and know always I *mean* better than I do."

It was my personal happiness and editorial good fortune to publish in our weekly a number of Miss Vawter's stories of children, which were

soon thereafter collected between covers and brought out as a book.

"Have seen Miss Vawter's prospective book," Mr. Riley wrote me, "very beautiful in type press and paper,—also her brother's design for cover, no less superb, alluring and original. . . . Did you *name* the book? It sounds so, as it's a happy title. Mr. Eitel tells me they hear from her and that she writes cheerily of her being improved and of final recovery, which, pray God, will be brought about."

But she went Away—that sweet-hearted, brave-souled girl. I am rich in a score of charming memories of her, which I must not narrate here, since these are reminiscences of her friend and mine. But one little flash of her spirit is so like him as well as like her, that I will give it. We had gone to a "show" given by some children, a sort of "Billy Miller's Circus Show" such as Riley wrote about. At the en-

trance we were told that admission for two would be ten pins. Miss Vawter and I could not muster that number—not even by being reckless of consequences. "Could you," she earnestly asked the doorkeeper, "could you change a hatpin?" He was not sure what the current rate of exchange for hatpins was; but after some grave consultation about it, we were admitted.

I ventured, about that time, to ask Mr. Riley's opinion of some verses written by a friend of mine. This girl had had a pretty severe struggle against poverty and other adverse circumstances. She wrote well enough so that it seemed a great pity she should not write better. Dr. John Finley, then president of Knox College, made it possible for this girl to go there, at no expense, for a special course in

studies she needed: And it was my happiness to help her get together a wardrobe suitable for college life; some articles of this modest outfit had been mine, and to a certain woman in Galesburg they looked far too modish "for a girl everybody knows is here on charity." The remarks of this woman so stung the sensitive spirit of my friend that she was of a mind to flee Galesburg and forego all that Knox College offered her. I thought that if I could assure her Mr. Riley found her talent worthy, she would stay and endure the unjust criticism of her clothes. I explained the situation to the poet, who replied as follows:

"Truly you deserve all praise and worship for your righteous championship of the gifted girl. Her poetry is genuine—both the serious and dialect. Only, she must not be celebrating herself (indirectly)

as she seems to be doing. If her present position be such as to hamper her independence, let her accept the condition *thankfully*—not combat it *petulantly*. In other words, let her give the true evidence of her divine endowments by cheerfully taking what the gods allow—*smiling* at the small measure, but not conceitedly. It seems to me, had I, as she, the large, *gentlemanly*, arrogant, pearl-gray-ass-of-a-woman in ostensible charge of my immortal soul, that I'd simply *have fun with her* by *seeming* to be influenced and controlled by her. *That's* the way to extract *her* fangs and render her utterly harmless. Of course, with all the fervor of my heart I damn such a woman and wonder at God's lapse—evident in her creation—but only let our genius think how she herself has escaped being such a personality—giving, *thrusting* upon God her thanks by the handful!

"This morning I couldn't write—as I so wanted—knowing and fully sympathizing with the spirit of your last, and its enclosure. Spare *yourself* all you can, I would say, in this regard. We all have inescapable worries, as God means it,—but we get

' out o' plumb' assuming those which belong to others. We think we help, but, nine times out o' ten, we simply hurt. This is not a doleful way of looking at things —it's a fact. When you are old—as I am —then at last—centuries beyond your present youth—you will realize the stark, bleak fact of this unlovely text.

"But how shall I write the poet in praise of her work, unless *she* invites my comment? Most gladly will I testify in her behalf, but think the motive should be sagely considered and provided by her. Wouldn't the really effective way be for her to ask my opinion? Then, with feasible occasion, I might offer the same without it seeming gratuitous. In any event be assured I am yours to command even as you will . . . And so, in the face o' the sun by day
Or the face o' the moon by night,
I am yours—yours—yours to command alway—
As you shall desire so I shall obey,
Till you'll be amused and, smiling, say,—
'Now isn't he polite!'"

IV

MY first published book—for I had written books since I was ten—was a year-book or, as it used to be called, a birthday book, compiled from Riley's poems.

"Tennyson's idyl, 'The Golden Year,' Mr. Riley wrote, "suggests what seems to me a lovely and apt name for your new book. Credit, too, for same may be indirectly given the master by some stanza of his poem to lead off with—as the enclosed, for instance, hastily set down last night. Get poem and look it over musingly. And do agree it's a be-you-tiful title!"

I did agree. And "The Golden Year" it was, and is. For a number of months his letters were full of allusions to the momentous work; if it had been the Century Dictionary or the tenth edition of the En-

cyclopædia Britannica, Mr. Riley could not have treated my editorship with more respect.

Now it was: "The Golden Year rounds on—and is going into 'proofed' typescript ere it's trusted to the printers overseas."

And so on, until: "Just got sight of your new book, and find it so *beautiful* a volume—so fine of dignity and character—that I must write you my instant congratulations. Ah! but the book is exquisite!"

But later, the inevitable! "I somewhat grimly smile, calling your attention to pages 56 and 118, where you've placed one and the identical stanza—it was so unearthly beautiful!"

Nevertheless, I became at once his "favorite author," and so remained for some years, during which I was, as he said, "the sole living author whose only book is all about me." His letters are addressed oftener to "My Dearest F. A.,"

"Dear Author Mine," "Dear My Favorite Author," than in any other way. Once it was, "Dear F. A. of the Universal World!" prefacing a letter which began: "Now you are simply a supernal being, beatified in your opulence of grace and loveliness. Of course you're inspired—'nothink short!' " I don't remember what I had done, but it seems to have been something, for "two certainly highly gifted young people" whom Mr. Riley was trying to help unto their own.

It must have been the valuable experience of transcribing so much lovely poetry that emboldened me to my one and only venture in verse. I wrote a birthday sonnet to Mr. Riley. This was not remarkable—but my temerity in sending it to him *was*.

"How can I ever answer your last letter?" he wrote. "And the poem! I

am still dazed with the revelation of this peerless gift of Song in your already overbrimmed possession, and yet mechanically must cry out to you:

'Ware shoal! 'ware shoal! 'ware shoal!' not by any means that it *isn't* good, but that it *is*."

Yet, when I inscribed for him a copy of "The Golden Year" with some of his own lines, he chided me:

"Why didn't you inscribe it with lines of your own verse? which same I know you can do with both force and grace. And here again I charge you not to neglect your serious exercise of that poetic gift, for you know not to what high worth it may develop in your chosen field of letters—indeed, *that* expression might in time come to be your best,—as, see vol. 'In this Our World,' by Charlotte Perkins Stetson,—a truly 'mighty line' she has just given the world, and which I've been trying to give *you*, but the booksellers can't secure even one copy of it. If you can do so there in Chicago, swoop down upon it with wildest beak, talons, and rush of wings!

Later, some time, then, I may tell you how, four or five years ago, I met the then unknown poet in Oakland, California, where she was one of our happy party on a visit to Joaquin Miller, with whose old mother and himself we joyously dined. So, whatever you do (since I can't) get at once a copy of Mrs. Stetson's poems: 'In This Our World.'"

Two weeks later he urges: "See at once splendid character comment in Feb. '*Current Literature*' of our 'Stout Stetson, as with eagle-eye she looks on the Pacific,' holding the proud World o'er it by the tail! *Do* find where she's to be found and write her, and send her address to me."

YATESESQE

THE wind blows over the hills of dawn,
The wind blows over the heavy of heart—
And the heavy heart aches on and on,
While the dancing Faeries wheel and part,
Twirling their star-white feet in a round—
Waving their moon-white arms in the air,
Till the low wind leaps, with a laughing sound,
And sings of a land where the old are fair—
Where the old are fair, and the sad are gay,
And life lives ever, and death is gone—
Where love and loveliness wear always,
And never a heart aches on and on.

—JWR

V

HE kept an eager lookout in those days for the fresh, new voices in prose and poetry. It was he who sent me the first thing of W. B. Yeats' that I ever saw: a thin little copy of "The Land of Heart's Desire," bound in gray boards; and on the fly-leaf Mr. Riley wrote these lines, which are so lovely that they cannot be called a parody; he called them, in the caption,

"Yatesesque:

The wind blows over the hills of dawn,
The wind blows over the heavy of heart—
And the heavy heart aches on and on,
While the dancing fairies wheel and part,
Twirling their star-white feet in a round—
Waving their moon-white arms in the air,
Till the low wind leaps, with a laughing sound,

And sings of a land where the old are fair—
Where the old are fair, and the sad are gay,
And life lives on, and death is gone—
Where love and loveliness wear alway,
And never a heart aches on and on."

The lines which suggested these I give also, that those who care to may compare them with Riley's. They are the lines sung outside Maurteen Bruin's house by the faery child before she enters and after she leaves.

"The wind blows out of the gates of the day,
The wind blows over the lonely of heart,
And the lonely of heart is withered away,
While the faeries dance in a place apart,
Shaking their milk-white feet in a ring,
Tossing their milk-white arms in the air;
For they hear the wind laugh and murmur and sing
Of a land where even the old are fair,
And even the wise are merry of tongue;
But I heard a reed of Coolaney say,

'When the wind has laughed and murmured and sung,
The lonely of heart must wither away.'"

Another author who should have done her best to have me shot at sunrise or hanged at high noon "of a Friday" was Alice French (Octave Thanet), from whom I unblushingly beguiled every now and then a three hundred or five hundred dollar story for about four dollars and ninety-eight cents. But a bigger heart than hers never beat; and instead of treating me as I deserved, she did me a multitude of charming kindnesses, personal as well as "professional." For instance, having found much to thrill her in W. E. Henley's poems, she bought at Scribners', in New York, a copy for me, and wrote me that it was on the way. When it was some time overdue, I told her.

She ordered a second copy—and they both came in one mail. "Send the duplicate to anyone who may care for it," she directed me. I sent it to Mr. Riley, who wrote of it:

"I don't like the man—the man so greatly endowed of God as he, and yet deliberately and elaborately crying out against Him and His dispensations irks an optimistic kuss like me immeasurably: All I most marvel at is therefore dubious,—sometimes it seems the man's transcendent genius, and then it seems God's patience—

But, anyway, I s'pose,
'He knows—He knows—HE knows!'"

Later, in talking to me about Henley, he expressed enormous contrition for that letter. "I didn't know, when I wrote it, what he has had to fight against," he said, humbly. "Good Lord! dying by inches in that hideous way! And having to see that child die! I'm sorry I ever said anything. Per-

haps if I were in his place I'd cry, too, about 'the night that covers me, black as the pit from pole to pole!' "

Henley's savage attack on Stevenson was hard for Mr. Riley to forgive; but I know he tried to feel the situation from Henley's side.

"Both of them physically frail, handicapped by almost continual suffering," he said; "and yet one is worshipped by all the world as its apostle of sweet courage, and the other wins respect from a few as the apostle of grim endurance. I think I can understand how Henley feels. But it's too bad! Too bad!"

Riley's enthusiasm for Stevenson was beautiful. I can remember his asking me with great wistfulness if I thought Stevenson had ever seen anything he (Riley) had written. And I know that once, passing a

theatre in Indianapolis, he was attracted by the announcement that E. J. Henley was playing there. Reflecting that this man must have had some acquaintance with Stevenson, Mr. Riley sought the stage-door and sent in his card. His mood was that which Browning so simply and exquisitely conveyed in "Memorabilia":

> "And did you once see Shelley, plain?
> And did he stop and speak to you?
> And did you speak to him again?
> How strange it seems, and new!"

The actor received Mr. Riley graciously, but his grace evanished quickly when he learned why his visitor had come.

"Stevenson?" he said, as if he recalled only with an effort his brother's long-time friend. "Stevenson? Ah, yes—yes! A queer person! Liked to wear a velvet

coat—and all that sort o' thing, don't ye know."

That was all. But Mr. Riley could never forget it.

Once he said to me: "Did you ever know that until after he was grown and mustached Stevenson was a blonde? That his hair didn't darken until he was past his majority?"

I had not known it; but it transpired that he had found a portrait of Stevenson which was taken when he was almost as fair as Riley's flaxen self.

"I wrote some maundering verses to it," —he told me in a letter, afterwards, "nay to the lovely man himself—sent picture and lines to magazine and publishing house, and they wrote to say portrait and verses would appear in their Christmas magazine, and enclosed a great corpulent check which I had not dreamed of in such connection—so returned it, coyly saying even if I had intended the lines for money,

their check was in vast excess of their worth—but if, in lieu of such sordid compensation, Robert Louis Stevenson's publishers were to send me a set of his books, it would seem to me about all the recompense I could bear.

"Well, now here's where only a poet can humor and account for the doings of Divinity:—As I stepped out into the golden morning-edge of my very recentest birthday, Robert Louis Stevenson was blithely seeing to it that his books were being then and there delivered into my hands by the expressman who looked and acted just for the world as though *he were* delivering the package to me—even made me sign something to that effect, I think!"

The temptation to go on and on quoting what he said and wrote about other authors is very great. But I will withstand it, save for a very few concessions.

I recall his ardent championship of Longfellow, and his bitterness against those who spoke contempt-

uously of Longfellow's flowing rhyme and rhythm, as if his thought must be less noble because it could be understood without a "key"; and as if his poetry must have been effortless because it could be memorized so easily.

"Nobody knows any better than I do," Mr. Riley said to me, "how hard it is to write such measures as 'The Psalm of Life.'"

He could not understand why Browning, if he believed in the worth of his message to the world, was not more concerned than he seemed to be that so small part of the world could comprehend it.

Of all his literary loves, though, none was so strong as that he had for Burns:

"Sweet singer that I lo'e the maist
O' ony, sin' wi' eager haste
I smacket bairn-lips ower the taste
O' hinnied Sang."

Burns in verse, and Dickens in prose. "Am just reading," he wrote in April, '99, "the primest, finest, most mellerest, ripest and juiciest of all novels ever writ! Wonder if you've run acrost it yet? It is called 'David Copperfield.' 'Ah, mountain pine and stately Kentish spire! Ye have one tale to tell!'"

His feeling for Poe is so well known that I offer no comment on it here, save such as may throw for some persons a new light on that affinity: James Whitcomb Riley came into the world on the day that Edgar Allan Poe went out of it. To a mind so sensitive, so imaginative as Riley's, this could not be without more significance than a mere coincidence.

VI

I CANNOT recall with any exactitude the "first beginnings" of the compilation called "Riley Love Lyrics"; that is, whether we thought first of the volume and then of the illustrator, or first of the illustrator and then of the volume.

Mr. William B. Dyer was one of the first—if not the very first indeed!—in Chicago to open a studio for the "new" photography which was so wonderfully different from the "old." He had made many studies of me, and of people I knew, and I was deeply interested in his art. It was probably my suggestion that his pictures would beautifully illustrate certain poems (he is a very modest gentleman, and

I am sure he didn't suggest it), and it may well have been I who thought first of Riley poems.

We sent down to Mr. Riley a number of Mr. Dyer's pictures, with a plan for the proposed book.

"At once," he wrote, "I'll take the lovely pictures to the B—M's—this immediate now. All I can say is in the assurance of my consent to the artist's scheme should my publishers indorse same. So please inform the gifted man of my hale appreciation of his work, which I fervently trust may meet the like estimate of the publishers. Would advise you to write them, as an appeal from you to them would far outweigh the very heftiest one of mine."

It was, of course, not my "appeal" at all, but his enthusiasm for the project and Mr. Dyer's capability for it that enlisted the publishers. And in a short while work on the volume was begun. I believe I selected the poems—sub-

ject to Mr. Riley's approval and to Mr. Dyer's acceptance of them as illustratable with a camera. And for further contribution, I posed for some of the pictures and acted as consulting "authority" on the types to be used for others. That is not to say that I presumed to offer Mr. Dyer any artistic suggestions—only, to help him from time to time with guesses as to what I thought would best express the poet's idea. When I couldn't guess, I asked the poet. Witness:

"My Dear Lady Glendower:

"As best I can here do I answer your order of questions—only wishing you had asked more, and more difficult ones. 1st. The fair girl whose father called her in and shut the door was twelve years of age, perhaps, and the dark, eerie child was younger by two years, about. (Mighty glad that poem is selected, as it has always been a favorite one, though *why* it is I don't know, any more than I don't know

whence it sprung or what the little changeling mystical bit is all about.)

"2d. I think it may be either a man or a woman who prays 'Let not this New Year be as happy as the old!' It's a mature, sensible lover, man or woman, with no golf-links background.

"3d. 'His Vigil' is the same married man who utterly loves his wife in sonnet 'When She Comes Home.' No, he is not ill—but sick of himself, and wants to be simply tolerated, all in the dark and the silence, by his *divine* superior, her *human* hand holding his own.

"4th. 'The Passing of a Heart' is a noble woman lied to by the husband who proves (very naturally) the opposite of all he promised ere they were one.—John Hay has a distitch som'er's which wisely bids the maiden:—'Marry whomsoever thou wilt, and thou wilt find thou hast married somebody else.'

"The old savant will be delighted to answer any question you can skeer up. Just as easy to him as it was to Merlin when the wily Vivian inquired 'Prithee, O sire adorable, why is 't the sweetest love must

old Savant will be thus delighted to answer any
ire you can steer up.— Just as easy to find
was to Merlin when the wily Vivien inquired
i, O Sire adorable, why isn't the sweetest love
words seem ever the saddest?" and he promptly
ed, with his twinkless eyes fixed full on space, "Be-
God loves the Irish."

a worried but bewildering wishes

Your always grateful

James O'Reilly

needs seem e'en the saddest?' and he promptly answered, with his twinkless eyes fixed full on space, 'Because God loves the Irish.'

"Wid a wurrld av bewilderin' wishes,
"Your always grateful
"Jamesy O'Reilly."

It was this "Jamesy" who wrote to me always in the gayest moods. "Dear F. A.," another of his letters begins, "which here means *F*ellow *A*merican:

"Till this blesséd minute I've not had the chanst to thank yez for the lavish bunch of papers. [Copies of our weekly containing his poem 'Billy Miller's Circus Show,' for the publication of which he seemed as eager as if it were his first appearance in print.] Sure they were *daisies*—wid *shamrocks* mixed amongst 'um thick as the sthars be curdled in The Milky Way! An' thank an' praise ye likewise for the *wrappers* of the same—wid every convainince on 'um but the paste an' postage-

stamps! So like yer own foresighted thoughtfulness!

"As ever your grateful, fraternal and eternal

"Jamesy O'Reilly."

In the margin of this letter is the following:

"Kate Shane, the coquette iv all Dayton,
Heart-struck wid a strange palpit*aa*tin',
Called Docther McGrothin,
Who said it were nawthin'
But somethin' the gyurl had been aitin'!"

VII

THERE are many memories of him which I find it hard to group. And yet, because each one of them is characteristic and illuminative, I cannot bear to leave them out.

I often asked him for verification or denial of certain stories about him. One that came to me was that he had been a guest of Mrs. Humphrey Ward's at a time when that distinguished lady was much interested in the mysteries of the planchette or ouija-board. The story ran that Mr. Riley, on being asked from whom he would like a message, promptly replied " Charles Lamb." (I should have said something about his great fondness for Lamb.) Thereupon he put his hands

on the little table, as directed, and it began to move about among the letters of the alphabet painted on the underlying board. To Mrs. Ward's mortification, it picked out a string of consonants from which no possible word could be guessed. She apologized to Mr. Riley for the ouija's misbehavior. He looked surprised. "Why," he murmured, "that's all right. Lamb stuttered, you know."

To this Mr. Riley pleaded guilty.

Another story, a very touching one, had it that in his young manhood Mr. Riley, desperately enamored of Ella Wheeler (now Mrs. Wilcox) and failing to win her, vowed himself to celibacy. He listened attentively till I got to the end. Then: "That's very interesting," he declared, enthusiastically; "and it's all perfectly true—except that I never saw the lady!"

This was what the children call "a naughty story"; for he had seen the lady. But perhaps that was just his way of evading a question I had no right to ask.

Once I ventured to ask him why he didn't write more sonnets.

"Because," he answered, dryly, "the only people who read sonnets expect presentation copies."

He fumbled in his pockets one day when I was talking with him, and brought out a bit of paper.

"Here's something I've been *plumbing* on," he said. "Like to have it tried on you?"

It was "Old Glory"! And *how* he read it! I wanted to know what he was going to do with it. "Oh, nothing, yet," he assured me. It was not polished to his satisfaction. I must have had the unbelievable temerity to ask him for it. Because he wrote me:

"As to the 'Old Glory' poem, I'm proud you want it, though I can't surrender it to the world at large just yet. In fact, it still remains unfinished, and when I shall be able to complete it to my satisfaction I've no idea under the heavens."

And later, replying to my letter when I had seen the poem and a beautiful article about the poet, in *The Atlantic Monthly*, he said:

"DEAR MY FAVORITE AUTHOR:

"Yes, it *was* lovely of *The Atlantic* and the peerless Carman to set me forth as they so generously have! And I've been trying to thank them, though I fear all too stammeringly to be clearly understood—as the measure of my appreciation and gratitude was, and is, quite beyond just expression. As to the poem, your praise of that demands like acknowledgment, though I spare you now—but must tell you that the *girth* of the check for it would seem to endorse your own exalted estimate of its worth. So that, as Mrs. Browning only could express it,

"'I stand too high for astonishment.'

"God bless us, every one!"

"Say 'Illileo,'" I urged him, one evening when we were sitting out under the trees and something had brought to my mind his hauntingly lovely, richly musical lines in that poem.

"Don't know it," he answered.

"I do," I replied. "Go ahead—I'll prompt you."

"I'll bet you do!" he chuckled; and began.

He *did* know it. And as he proceeded, the dripping, honey-golden lusciousness of his own verse enchanted him as it was enchanting me. The beauty, the warmth, the music of his voice was all too indescribable.

"'And I held you in my bosom, as the husk may hold the fruit.'"

"God!" he said, fervently, "that is a beautiful line! . . . You know how I mean that?"

I did.

"Many people wouldn't," he went on, plaintively.

"No. . . . Do you recall in Henry van Dyke's reminiscences of Tennyson that once when reading aloud to Dr. van Dyke, Tennyson said something similar? The line at which he exclaimed was: 'The league-long rollers broke in thunder on the beach.' And as Tennyson boomed it forth in his great voice the effect was truly superb."

"Didn't van Dyke understand?"

"Oh, yes!"

"My God! No poet is ever *complacent.* How can anybody think it? The torment of the difference we feel between the thing visioned and the thing transcribed is more than enough to keep us in hell. And when you *do* find that you've got a glint of the real glory in something you've done, do you get

complacent? No! You feel as if the Lord had sent it to you, all faceted and flawless, and let you set it in with your own fumblings. Proud? No! You're just a'mighty *grateful!* "

His understanding of human nature was introspective and intuitive, I think—seldom, if ever, deductive and analytical. He did not readily establish points of easy contact with other people, and he was not happy with strangers. He seemed afraid to be himself with them, for fear they would not understand, and his sensitiveness was so great that he could scarcely have borne misunderstanding. I am sure he was right in his feeling about this; though often one wished he were not so loath to "be met." He hated "lionizing," not because he didn't like being a lion—for I am convinced he did—but because

of the dismal inability of most persons to treat lions in any way which does not put them and keep them at a disadvantage. He knew he was not at his best when "lionized" —indeed, that he was quite at his worst. And no one can blame him for shying from the experience.

"I stand on one foot," he complained to me, whimsically, "and then on the other foot. And I don't know what to say."

His intimates understood this so well that they seldom or never tried to show him off.

But I recall one occasion when a few of his closest friends conspired against him in behalf of a very worthy candidate for the honor of Riley's acquaintance. This gentleman was a physician in southern Illinois. He had just published a charming book of boy life in the country, rich in such human nature

as Riley knew and loved best. He was the quietest, shyest person imaginable, but he had mustered courage to come to Indianapolis in the hope of seeing Mr. Riley, whom he had idolized from afar.

I was one of those who plotted to introduce this gentleman into a small circle of friends with whom Mr. Riley was so much at ease that he might forget the presence of one stranger. His publishers were party to the plot, and the episode was " staged " in the private office of Mr. Bobbs.

The gentleman on pilgrimage was introduced; and then everyone worked mightily to start talk that might lure Mr. Riley from his silence. But he was like the Tar-Baby: "he kep' on sayin' nothin'."

I cannot remember how or why we talked of Hamlet. Perhaps some one was playing it in Indianapolis.

But I know we were getting rather desperate.

"I'd like," someone said, "to see Hamlet played by a fair-haired Dane. I'm tired of brunette melancholy."

"Or by a fat man," another interposed. "Hamlet himself says he is fat and scant of breath."

And so on. It was all very forced and foolish; but the Tar-Baby had us almost hysterically self-conscious. Finally someone was emboldened to abandon strategy and lead a direct attack.

"How would *you* like to see 'Hamlet' played, Mr. Riley?" he asked.

Mr. Riley appeared to consider.

"I'd like to see it played by a picked nine," he replied, gravely.

That was his total contribution. But there have been pilgrims to shrines of greatness who have fared worse.

VIII

RILEY was the poet of childhood; but unless I grievously misread him, he was not fond of children in the way that we are who love to have them around. He delighted in his memories of his own childhood and in fancies, whimsies, those memories inspired; but on the occasions when I knew him in the actual presence of flesh-and-blood youngsters, he was inclined to be easily disturbed by their behavior.

I think his vivid recollections of how he felt when he was a little boy made him critical of the attitude of most grown-ups toward small persons; and he may have been fearful of seeming to childish minds no better than the rest of the bungle-

some adult world. He talked to me once of how it made him shrink and shrivel to see people pounce at a strange child and expect instant intimacy from it. He respected the child-mind far too much for that.

I have seen him sit in a room with a shy little girl and appear not to notice her; but to keep juggling or "palming" a half-dollar — in a "now-you-see-it-now-you-don't" way—until she was beside him, trying to see where it went to when it went away. Nor would he presume upon that show of intellectual interest, to put his arm around her or chuck her under the chin—let alone to tell her, in the uncouth jocosity of persons who are sure they "love children," that he was going to steal her.

He had a deep sense, I am sure, of the dignity and aloofness of young souls. He knew how tolerant they

have to be of parents and other elders. Youth, far from thawing his shyness, seemed rather to increase it. If he was ever at his best when talking with children, those were times I had not the happiness to share. Yet children felt the witchery of his personality, and I have known them to sit spellbound by his talk with their elders.

One Sunday evening so early in my visits to Indianapolis that "Ed" was still a small boy, Elva Eitel and little Ed and I were returning to their home from having spent some enchanted hours at "Aunt Mamie's" with "Uncle Jim." I daresay Elva and I did not leave many pauses—we seldom did—but Ed was very quiet, even for him.

As we neared home he said:

"Do you know what I've been thinking?"

We didn't.

" I've been thinking that the most fascinating thing in the whole world is to hear Uncle Jim talk."

We agreed with him.

Yet, not once all evening had his Uncle Jim directed a fragment of conversation " at " Ed.

This may have been instinct with Mr. Riley, or it may have been memory, or it may have been canny, mature wisdom. But whatever it was, I often wish more people had it.

It was a strange relationship: he valued them not for what they gave him of pleasure or understanding, but for all that " wonderland of wayward childhood " they helped him to recall; and they valued him because he seemed to take them for granted, as if they were grown-ups, making no insulting condescensions to them, but allowing them to form their own opinions of his worth.

The first of his books that he gave

me has these lines of special inscription:

"O Wonderland of wayward Childhood! What
An easy, breezy realm of summer calm
And dreamy gleam and gloom and bloom and balm
Thou art! The Lotus-Land the poet sung,
It is the Child-World while the heart beats young."

And in the proem to that volume he sang:

"O Child-World: After *this* world—just as when
I found you first sufficed
My soulmost need—if I found you again,
With all my childish dreams so realized,
I should not be surprised."

I wrote, once on a time, for *The Book Buyer*, a little article about Riley's poems of childhood, and when it was ready for the printers I sent it to him for corrections or suggestions.

"Of course," he wrote, "I approve the enclosed pages of praises of my boyhood muse—though *you're* a gentler one. Voiceless, therefore, in awe of reverence I bow. Nor think my attitude less worshipful when you find my pencil-marks, O so delicately trenching on your lines at times.

"On page 7, upper page, your comment reminds me, too, that you might find for it a fit quotation from a little poem in 'Armazindy' vol., I think. I forget its exact title, but it's about a 'Dear child-hearted Woman that is dead'—and God hears her spirit whisper, just as He has made a *stately angel* of her, and in a twinkling she is a *little child.*"

His ability, in story-telling, to personate a little boy was more than consummate histrionism; there was something psychic in it—as if the little boy he used to be came back at times, not only in the poet's mind, but in his looks and voice and movements. I have heard few things more wonderful than

his narration of " Bud's Bear Story." It seemed to me as if I could see the workings of Bud's mind, as he conceived it point by point—that marvellous tale of the little boy in the woods, who, being chased by a bear, " clumb " a tree, the bear pursuing. " Bud's " excitement as his hero "haf to stay up in the tree—all night—" with the bear below going " Wooh ! woo—wooh!" was all evident in his face. Then—! never, until in that other Child-World I come up with him again, shall I see anything like the expression on Bud's face, when he thought how to save his hero.

"The old Bear finds the Little Boy's *gun*,
you know,
' At's on the ground.—(An' it ain't broke
at all—
I 'ist *said* that!) An' so the old Bear
think
He'll take the gun an' *shoot* the Little
Boy:—"

But shoots *himself* instead!

One often feels the authors of adventure stories caught in traps of their own contriving; but one seldom meets another so deliciously frank as "Bud."

Another masterpiece of what I can only call reincarnation was the boy who was not going to say his prayers "to-night, ner to-morrow night, ner the nex' night. An' after that, if nothin' happens, I ain't *ever* goin' to say 'em." But the nature of the thing he was pretty sure *would* happen filled him with a terror which his bravado could scarcely overcome.

How much he lived in that land of long-ago, I suppose no one fully realized.

I remember telling him one day some boyish thing told me by his only nephew, "Ed"—Edmund H. Eitel, for some years his uncle's

secretary, and now his literary executor and his biographer. The poet was listening to me—but from far away. When I paused, he murmured, abstractedly:

"Who told you? 'Hum'?"

"Hum" was what he called his younger brother Humboldt, dead, then, for many years.

And I can never forget the passionate intensity he expressed of longing for his mother.

"She has been dead," he once said to me, "for more than twenty years. Yet there are times when I want her so it seems to me I shall *die*."

His sisters told me a multitude of stories of his youth. But I shall not try to retell them. They belong to the "Life" which Edmund Eitel is writing with such love and care and understanding. In these modestly offered pages I am keep-

ing strictly to my own recollections. All over the country there are—there must be!—other persons with other recollections, and other rich hoards of his letters. To every one of us, it may be that he showed a different phase of himself; the impressions of one may even seem to contradict those of others. His was such infinite variety! And, of course, each of us saw him through a different kind of lens, according to our different personalities. It is my hope that never may I seem to say "Thus he was"—only, "Thus he appeared to me."

IX

MR. RILEY'S readings of his own works were, as everybody knows, in very great demand throughout the country. It is surprising how much of that sort of thing he did; because he disliked travel and he heartily disliked being on a platform. He never overcame his stage fright, and used to suffer acutely from it—quaking nerves, stomach affected, and other racking ills. "Getting ready for the road," he writes, "and gosh! how I dread it!"

"My Favorite Author," one letter begins, "I fear will not get as worthy a letter as deserved this time,—for, to save the soul o' me, I can find no gasp of time from the incessant havoc of travel and breathless stress of having to catch the next train

for some place else! And that letter of yours was such a good one, that a reply less masterful simply isn't fair to either of us, God knows. But what is there left a fellow between trains—poised on the crossties of one track, wildly trying to catch one train while he dodges another, and wishing he were in Chicago, where everyone walks—save, doubtless, the walking delegate? Both at Peoria and Galesburg your friends were most pleasantly manifest—so strikingly and helpfully so, that at both points of our combine I wanted them right along through the rest of the tour . . . 'And so we plough along,' as the fly said to the ox."

He once told me how he happened to bring into his repertory that narrative which Mark Twain called the supreme example of American humor, giving it as evidence in support of his contention that the charm of American humor lies not in the matter but in the manner. As for matter, that story is probably

the hoariest "chestnut" in the whole category of time-honored jokes. But as Riley told it, it has become a classic. Briefly the story is that of a soldier whose leg was shot off. He entreated a comrade to carry him back to the hospital-tent; the comrade complied and was carrying him pickaback, when another shell whizzed past carrying off the wounded man's head.

The comrade, unaware of what had happened, was halted by his Colonel. "Where are you going with *that?*" the officer demanded.

"To the hospital; his leg's shot off."

"His *leg?*" the Colonel thundered; "his *head's* shot off!"

The soldier laid his burden down and looked at it reproachfully. "He told *me* it was his leg," he explained to the Colonel.

The way Mr. Riley came to use this ancient story on the platform was this: He and Bill Nye were on a reading tour in the South. The weather was oppressively warm, their engagements were many, they had a great deal of travel and very little rest, and neither man was in robust health. All, however, would have been well enough had it not been for the reception committees. On the humorists' arrival in each town they were met by a delegation of influential citizens chosen with reference to their local repute for humor. Then, instead of going to the hotel where the weary " troopers " might rest, " low-necked hacks " were commandeered and the strangers were driven out to see " the high iron bridge," by which general description Mr. Riley was wont to characterize the average small city's point of interest. All the way to the

" bridge " and back the local humorists regaled their guests with stories of rare old vintages. And if the guests did not laugh fit to kill it was plain to see that they would be put down as having swelled heads. So they laughed, though it did indeed almost kill them, until one day Mr. Riley struck. He was hot, he was tired, he was a-wearied of high iron bridges, and go a-riding in that inevitable sea-going hack he *would* not. But Mr. Nye, unable to contemplate the local humorists' dismay, went with them. The afternoon wore on toward six o'clock before he returned.

Mr. Riley had written a lot of letters, rested himself, and was feeling so fine as to be full of mischief. At sight of Nye's tired, white face Riley was moved to wickedness. He tried to think which of all the hoary tales they heard in every town

Nye could least endure to hear again. The man with his head shot off stood out prominent in the record of their sufferings; so he began to tell it to Nye, faithfully mimicking the manner of those local humorists who had so strange a genius of telling a tale wrong-side-before that whatever pith or point it might have had was undiscoverable. The way Riley told that story sent Nye into paroxysms of laughter, and it was he who persuaded the astonished Riley to try this on the platform.

He never told it twice the same. At each telling he seemed to have some new inspiration. I heard it many, many times and came as near knowing it by heart as one could come to knowing a thing of such infinite variety. I remember one night in Indianapolis when Mr. Riley was reading in English's Theatre. It was his first public

appearance in his home town in a number of years, and he had given his services to raise money for a monument to General Harrison. Indianapolis was greatly excited over the event; people were in line before the ticket-window as early as two o'clock in the morning—seven hours before the sale of tickets was to begin. Mr. Riley suffered augmented agonies from stage-fright; his nervousness caused him a great deal of trouble with his weak heart, and, among other ways of expressing itself, managed to bring on severe nose-bleeding. To know something of what he suffered was to suffer with him. I was in a box with his sisters, and we were all nervous. When Mr. Riley came to the story of the wounded soldier, of which by that time all his auditors had heard so much, we followed the familiar narrative point by point, anxious that

he should get all the best points in. Alas, one of the funniest touches of all he left out entirely. We were so sorry. But, listen! What was he doing? The story was nearing its end, and the audience was convulsed with merriment. When every one had laughed until he cried, until his sides ached with shaking, until he felt that he could laugh no more, Mr. Riley went back to the beginning of the narrative and told it all over again, putting in the excruciatingly funny point he had missed before. And on the second telling his audience waxed hysterical.

I recall this incident because it is so illustrative of his kind of humor, which depended not at all on the surprisingness of what he had to say, but altogether on the inimitable way he had of saying it.

One never tired of the things he

did. So far from feeling satisfied because you had once heard him recite "Good-by, Jim! Take keer yerself," one hearing of it only made you the more eager to hear it again and again. You might know the poem by heart; you might have heard him recite it fifty times; but it was always as fresh to you as the morning dew, and the more you had had of it the more you hungered for.

Mary Riley Payne, the younger of the poet's sisters, has a great deal of the same sort of whimsical humor which her brother Jim had. And it was Mary who expressed, in comic paraphrase of a then current coon-song, an opinion which may be heretical on the Isle of Man, but is strict orthodoxy in many other places. Mr. Riley had given a reading in Tremont Temple, Boston, to an audience which jammed that

ample auditorium to its very ridge-pole. Not only the populace, but all the Olympians were there. Julia Ward Howe introduced him, and it was an occasion, even for Tremont Street. On the same evening, Mr. Hall Caine read in Boston to an audience, we were told, numbering less than a score.

"Oh, well!" Mary said. "What's wonderful in that? There's only one of Jim in all the world—and Hall Caines 'look alike to me!'"

From the Sargent Portrait

C 23350B

X

THERE was indeed only "one of Jim in all the world." I have heard the sentiment expressed in many ways, but I have often thought I like Mary's way best.

I want to tell what he was like as I saw him and knew him, but I find myself wondering to what I may compare him so that those who never saw him may understand.

His portraits tell how he looked to people he passed or people he met in an ordinary way. But with what similes shall one tell how he looked when he was telling Bud's bear story or teasing Hector Fuller about "them molasses," or reading "Bianca," or reciting the veteran's tale of the man with his leg shot off, or listening from out the far-away

Child-World when he asked: "Who told you? 'Hum?'"

There was only one of him, but that one was so various! "How many of my selves are dead?" he questions in one of his poems. But however many he may have felt behind him, he had at all times enough left him to furnish a regiment of ordinary men with personality.

I hope I have not conveyed the impression that the moods which I have quoted were ever-present with him, nor even that they were his most frequent states of mind. They would have been far less 'witching had they been perpetual, or easy of access. In truth, they were so far from evocable at will—either his will or the wish of others—that they were all the more precious when the gods of the soul's winds blew favoring breaths.

So sensitive a creature was prey

to ten thousand torments, from within and from without, as well as attuned to ten thousand delights.

His body, as completely as his spirit, seemed to present infinite "exposed nerve" surfaces, which shot tingling pain through him when they were ever so lightly brushed. He was often irritable; and his irritability had a tendency to abandon the sullen defensive and become actively, stingingly mean. What he said and did at such times caused him agonies of remorse afterwards. I can never forget some of the things he said to me about this terrible contrition he was forever suffering. It was one of the major tragedies of his temperament.

He was so sensitive to self-criticism that I think he had less susceptibility than the average to criticism from without.

When his "Rubáiyát of Doc'

Sifers" was appearing in *The Century*, some tender paragrapher in a California weekly howled: "That plague of bucolic imbecility, James Whitcomb Riley, has broke loose in *The Century* again." Something in one of his letters made me think he had seen this and been hurt by it. I ventured upon such consolation as my twenty-year-old bitterness with the crass world could muster. I daresay he was much amused, but he did not say so.

"This is no letter at all," he wrote, "only a long-distance clapping of hands over your lovely 'Revelation of Christopher' [a short story, just published]—yes, and the fine, strong, heartening letter I'd been silently applauding since its inspired creation on the 19th; for even a full day prior to its arrival the spirit of it smote me like a sort of anonymous glory. Of course I shall never be able to thank you for it—though certain I am that you already know the righteous sense of my

appreciation. But you must not think it is 'the oft-recurring gnat'—the rabidly erudite little critic you so recently was afflicted with—that vexes me seriously at all. *I'm* the fellow that gets after *me* the most effectively and relentlessly. Now, however, I'm at peace even with myself again, and no end of good things are coming my way. Wish I could see you and talk some of 'em over *at* you!"

Another time he wrote:

"I am still so at sea under such stress of weather; my mind (such as it is) remains, as then, largely chaotic. Fact is, *the youth and elasticity* is gone clean out of it, and it now seems to fit the demand like the slack, limp lasting of an old shoe. Have been trying to rest it, but the graceless thing is beyond remedy, I really believe. In meantime, how flourishes your own art-labors? Can you yet, as Miss Murfree said to me jocosely of her sister ["Charles Egbert Craddock"]—'write a novel with your hat on and a parasol under your arm'?"

How shall one make plain to

any contented, corn-fed citizen the super-tragedy of that "slack, limp" mind and the feeling that "youth and elasticity is gone clean out of it"? If one has never thrilled to the wonder-workings of such a mind, never known the magic which evoked

"The music of the laughing lip, the lustre of the eye;
The childish faith in fairies and Aladdin's magic ring—
The simple, soul-reposing, glad belief in everything.—
When life was like a story, holding neither sob nor sigh,
In the golden, olden glory of the days gone by,"

how shall he know the desolation of having forgot the "Sesame"? Nor is the despair of each lapse less abysmal because in that tiny, uninvaded corner of the mind's kingdom where a remnant of memory is still regnant, there is a counsellor

to remind one that on other occasions he seemed equally conquered, yet came forth in triumph. "Ah, yes! but I was younger, then. This time my exile is for all eternity."

If it was disappointing to his family and friends that he was unable, at times, to unlock the gates of that world where he was a fairy Prince-Charming — youthful and all-conquering—what must it not have been to him to stand outside, an old man in a beggar's cloak?

If ever I was impatient with him on that account, he knows, now, what my contrition is—and has forgiven me.

His contrition was always charming, and he never withheld it.

"It was my 'plumbing' with one phrase of [the preface of] your Golden Year that scarred its grammar. You had said that Mr. Riley (himself) 'might

say "waller in"' and I tried to correct the inference as to your suggestion that *my* grammar was no better than my old farmer's. So it seems, after all, you were right, and God knows the pang it gives me to admit it."

His sensitiveness to being thought colloquial by restriction and not by choice, was very considerable. Whether people liked or did not like what he did, he wanted them to know that it was done with painstaking effort by a man who expressed much in homely or child-simple language *not* because that was his only speech, but because he had an artist's sense of the way certain ideas should be set forth. He had a scholarly knowledge of verse forms and a facile command of them, equalled by few poets of any day. He used words with the artistry of a lapidary; and he was as much at ease with the richest,

most sensuous words as Swinburne, while commanding the simplest with a mastery like that of Burns.

When my first novel was in manuscript, he read it with painstaking particularity, and wrote me a letter thousands of words in length, containing his comments and suggestions and corrections. I remember discussing some of these with Professor William Lyon Phelps, of Yale, who was much interested in Mr. Riley's attitude toward certain words. Sometimes one could share his feeling about words, and again it was not possible; but it was always interesting to hear how words affected him. For instance: "Don't use *trudge!* it is a horrid, patronizing word"; and "*countryside* is an abomination, weakly smacking of petty poetry"; and so on. Now, "trudge" is *not* a patronizing word; but he had an aversion from it.

And there is no equivalent for "countryside" in certain usages. But he was as sensitive to the impression words made on him as the master-musician is to sounds.

For his dialect poetry he kept notebooks as accurate as a scientist's. Not only was the euphony of the dialectics a careful study with him, but he knew why some children, for instance, say "thist" instead of "just," and why others say "ist." There was nothing haphazard in any of his work. The philologist of the future, studying Middle-Western colloquialisms of the late-nineteenth century, may depend on Riley's transcription of them as the most exact ever made.

"Yesterday," one of his letters begins, "I dined merrily with the sister and her *Eitelian* family; and *along with the dessert* came Ed's and Elizabeth's letters from you. Nor could the exacting literary pep-

MERRY CHRISTMAS!

James Whitcomb Riley

INDIANAPOLIS

Dec. 26
1890

Dear E. A:

Yesterday I dined merrily with the sister and her Eitelian family; and along with the dessert came Edi and Elizabeth's letters from you.—For could the exacting literary pipties of the Epicurean old-fool uncle find but one vaguest savor in either missive to be just a trifle squeamish over;—i.e: in one of them you said you never punned—yet with a brazen pun both before and after the assertion. And then—all to myself—I sniffed and said "Ho-ho!" And then—Employing the same discreet voice—I said "Ah-ha!" as one believe whose slowly wakening mind "beat time to nothing in his head from some odd corner of the brain."—And then. . . Of course the folks never knew or cared about some hasty note I gravely set down on an envelope; but it was:—

In jousts of old, with couchant quill,
A poet and compiless met—
The verse't of punsters ever yet!—
And punned, and laughed just fit to kill!—
And—fact is—she's a laughlin' still!

How'd you like some autographed "C. Y's" for New years gifts for friends? Ans. promptly, and I'll do 'em at once and they'll reach you in time.—JR

tics of the epicurean old-fool uncle find but one vaguest savor in either missive to be just a trifle squeamish over—i.e.: in one of them you said you never punned —yet with a brazen pun both before and after the assertion. And then—all to myself—I sniffed and said, 'Ho-ho!' And then—employing the same discreet voice—I said 'Ah-ha!' as one belike whose slowly wakening mind 'beat time to nothing in his head from some odd corner of the brain.' And then . . . Of course *the folks* never knew or cared about some hasty note I gravely set down on an envelope; but it was:—

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The *verse't of punsters ever yet!*
And punned, and laughed just fit to kill!—
And—fact is—she's a laughlin' still!"

He loved to play with words—as when he said he had gloated over something "till my epigloatis is 'most *bust.*" And he had a fancy for such incongruous associations as when he assured me that another

something was "what Theocritus would call 'a peach.'"

After my first book was published he wrote:

"For a long, sad while I was afraid you meant to shy out of it [authorship] and be lured into being simply the producer of the ever-prone-to-fly-upward-and-wink-outward scintillations of the day and hour. *Now*, you see, you're a 'bedient child of the gods; and, as such, they'll always be good to you—*henceforward evermore!* Nods and becks and wreathéd smiles

As you delight 'em
Ad infinitum."

When his Biography began to be talked of, and he was directing the gathering together of materials for it, I was asked to loan his letters to me, for copying. He wrote:

"Thank you for the letters my Biographer wants. He has astounded me with his collection of like matter from literary friends in all corners of the world, it would seem

. . . As to your own,—they have all been preserved—most of them in one place of security, though some few elsewhere adrift are no less secure, and *all* can be restored, if desired, for *your* Biography!

A notable lady of letters was she,
While a man of mere note-able letters was he—
So found the unbiased biographers
Of these diverse-gifted chirographers!"

I am sure it is quite unnecessary for me to say anything about the proportion of gallantry to strict truthfulness in all the pretty playfulness of his letters to me. If I could have shared their quaintness without interpreting their allusions to my small, unimportant endeavors, I would naturally have preferred to do so. But as this was to be in no sense a biography, but only an impression of Mr. Riley as it was my privilege to have seen and known him, I hope I am pardoned the personal point of view. In that "Life"

which Edmund Eitel is writing, we shall see Riley from a hundred viewpoints, and know how infinite was his variety. How many of his phases I never knew, I can but vaguely guess. Those in which he revealed himself to me, I have tried to describe so that others might glimpse something of his ineffable charm.

His was by far the richest personality I have ever known. Acquaintance with him is my supreme consolation for what would otherwise have been the irreparable loss of not having known Charles Lamb. As it is, I feel that not only have I known something of Riley, but that somehow, through knowing him I have known Lamb too, and a host of other immortals—if, indeed, there *are* a host of them!

Because he was playful and not didactic, he taught me many things.

They are not easy to enumerate, nor even to define. They are so inwoven with the woof-threads of my mind's pattern that, although I can distinguish them, and hail them gratefully, I can scarcely point them out to others. I think though that I can with strict truthfulness say there is never a day when I am not conscious of weaving into my living some color that he taught me to appreciate and how to use. His phrases, his melodies are part of the fabric of my speech, my thought; the cadences of his voice are ever-present in my ears. So also it must be, I feel sure, with everyone who knew him. He was one of those who make immortality seem indisputable.

Not only the thousands who filed past to look at him as he lay sleeping beneath the dome of his State's Capitol, but tens of hundreds of

thousands of others throughout the land, murmured their good-byes to him in words of his own verse. He is not dead, whose song lives in so many hearts.

"I cannot say, and I will not say
That he is dead.—He is just away!
With a cheery smile and a wave of the hand,
He has wandered into an unknown land,
And left us dreaming how very fair
It needs must be, since he lingers there."

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